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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate, in a broad sense, children's understanding of various types of people in two social domains: television and real life. Specifically, the study was designed to solicit information about (1) the physical and psychological abilities and vulnerabilities children would attribute to television characters and real people, (2) the kinds of knowledge children of various ages would bring to bear in judging how people varied in their reality, and (3) the nature and extent of children's personal involvements with these models. A total of 70 kindergarten and elementary-age boys were presented with photographs of realistic television characters (such as Tom Bradford from "Eight is Enough"), mixed realistic characters (such as Fonzie from "Happy Days"), or unrealistic characters (such as Superman). Children were then asked to respond to 25 forced-choice questions about that person's attributes and to pick one character they wished they were and to give their reason for the selection; this procedure was repeated until each child's top four choices were obtained. In general, results indicated that the reality status of television and real people is evident to all children during the elementary years, but that children of various ages differ in how they interpret these differences among people. (MP)

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Who Flies, Who Cries?

Children's Understanding of People from Television and Real Life

David Fernie

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Televison-watching and school activities occupy much of children's waking hours, exposing them to a wide range of adult models, from the fantastic to the real, who may influence their attitudes and behavior. At one extreme, there are characters such as Superman -- a man with a superhuman commitment to fighting for truth, justice and the American Way. As you may remember, he leaps tall buildings in a single bound. There are also television characters such as the Fonz, from "Happy Days" -- a person with an emotional vulnerability -- a heart of gold -- beneath a tough exterior. He performs impossible but minor physical feats like turning a jukebox on with a snap of his fingers. At the other extreme in television, are fairly credible characters, such as Tom Bradford from "Eight is Enough." Unable to leap tall buildings or perform magic tricks, he reveals the joys and frustrations of raising a large family. Beyond television, there are people such as teachers, real people whom children interact with as educators, disciplinarians, and friends.

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As adults, we are able to see televison models and real people as belonging to separate and qualitatively different social domains. Even if at times, we choose to regard television characters as more than merely entertaining or silly, we have the knowledge and ready facility to both critically evaluate them and to monitor our level of involvement with them. However, children's conceptions of, and relationships to, televison and real models may be a quite different issue. Given the common assumption that younger children do not adequately distinguish fantasy from reality, and given the centrality of fantasy activities, televison and role models

in their lives, it is important to investigate and compare children's views of real people and a range of television characters. Do children, and especially younger children, discern the differences between these types of models that are apparent to us? Are they able and willing to critically evaluate the fantastic and implausible people created by television? Are they able to monitor their personal involvement with the types of models they find especially appealing? Although children's person perception has been a traditional research issue, and their perception of televison characters has been given some recent attention, studies in developmental psychology rarely address these questions across the complementary domains of televison and everyday life.

Today, I will discuss results of one such developmental study which address three main issues. The first issue is children's conceptions of televison characters and real people. We were interested in the physical and psychological abilities and vulnerabilities children would attribute to them. By asking about a wide range of attributes, from anatomy to emotions, we sought to assemble attribute profiles which would describe, in some depth, children's beliefs about various types of models.

The second issue is children's abilities to critically evaluate them. We were interested in the kinds of knowledge children of various ages would bring to bear in discussing people who varied widely in their reality status. While the first issue's major question is descriptive, i.e., "what are these people like," the second issue's major question is more evaluative, i.e., "what are these people really like?"

The third issue is children's identification with televison and real people. We wanted to know the nature and extent of children's personal involvements with them, and the process of psychological identification is highly relevant to this concern. By asking about children's identification

with a wide range of models, we sought to determine the particular types of models that children find especially involving.

Prior to beginning the study, I asked a group of adults to judge the physical and psychological realism of a variety of television characters. Based on these judgments, characters were classified according to their overall reality status as either unrealistic characters, such as Superman, mixed reality characters, such as the Fonz, or realistic characters, such as Tom Bradford. The particular televison characters rated by adults, and then used in the study, are listed on your handout.

I then interviewed a total of seventy elementary school-aged boys individually, for approximately forty-five minutes each. The youngest group were kindergarten and first graders, the middle group were third graders, and the oldest group were fifth and sixth graders.

Children's conceptions of familiar television characters and real people were solicited by presenting them with a photograph of an individual, and asking them to respond to twenty-five forced-choice questions about that person's attributes. Within each question, children selected either an unrealisitic phrase, or a realistic phrase to describe the person. I asked questions about people's physical abilities (e.g., "Is Tom Bradford strong enough to lift a truck with his bare hands, or not?"), their physical vulnerabilities (e.g., "Can Tom Bradford live forever or not live forever?"), their psychological states (e.g.,"Does Tom have dreams or not have dreams?"), and their emotional qualities (e.g., "Does Tom always feel happy, or sometimes feel happy, or never feel happy?"). Each child answered the same twenty-five questions for one unrealistic character, one realisitc character, and one real person, while the particular people children described varied from child to child. For example, Superman was the unrealistic character described by some children, while others described the Bionic Man. By this method, I assembled attribute profiles for each type of model and

compared them both within and between age groups, detailing specific distinctions children of various ages made between people.

The results across age reveal children's uniform belief that unrealistic characters are unique, and that real people and realistic characters are similar to each other, but there are age differences in the particular ways children see superheroes as being different. While boys in all age groups describe them as unrealistic in their physical abilities, younger children extend their uniqueness to other types of attributes. For example, younger children often stated that an unrealistic character, unlike other types of models, could live forever, did not need to sleep, never hurt people, or never felt bad. Since many of these attributes are unexpressed in programs (such as living forever), or difficult to portray (such as never feeling bad) it appears that younger children imaginatively conflate superheroes' physical abilities with other attributes, and thus, have an idealized conception of these characters. For children in this age group, he who flies doesn't cry.

Boys in the middle and older age groups also describe unrealistic characters as significantly different from other models, but primarily in terms of their physical abilities. Contrary to younger boys, they attribute realistic emotions and physical needs to all models, thus humanizing even unrealistic characters. For children in the two older age groups, "He who flies, sometimes cries."

With respect to the second issue, children's critical awareness of these differences between people, I found several indications in the interview that the middle and older group boys judge models from a wider and more sophisticated perspective than that of younger boys. First, boys in the older two groups were likely to follow an attribute question with a general statement, like "everybody feels bad sometimes." Second, they often

spontaneously referred to televison people by their real names. For example, given a photograph of "the Fonz," boys in the third to sixth grades were much more likely than younger boys to call him Henry Winkler. Third, they sometimes asked the interviewer to clarify the frame of reference which they should take in selecting attributes, for example, "Do you mean in real life or on the show?" Finally, I asked a post-interview set of questions to probe children's awareness of actors' real-life status--of their lives independent of television roles. Again, the boys in the two older groups were significantly more knowledgeable, and able to take a frame of reference outside of televison. For example, in explaining how Superman would be different at home, after the show, one younger boy said, "he takes off his cape," while another said "he'll only fly in his backyard." Even when younger children sensed some differences in Superman's off-camera behavior, the differences remained bound to the televison portrayal. Contrast those responses with the understanding of a third grader--"he'd probably sit around and watch TV"--and the critical awareness of a sixth grader--"he's like normal. He can't do any of those things like breaking walls."

These types of responses and spontaneous comments, as well as the many realistic attributes older children assign to all models, enhance our view of the fantasy-reality distinctions children apply to people, and the ways in which these sorts of distinctions develop. Contrary to the prevailing view that young children do not adequately differentiate the real from the fantastic, we find that they differentiate fantastic characters from other models to an extreme degree. Older children exhibit greater sophistication, not by drawing sharper distinctions between people, but rather by integrating general knowledge about people, and specific knowledge about the real-life status of actors into their judgments.

As for the third main issue, children's identification with this range

of models, I focused on two ways in which children could meaningfully relate television and real models to their own lives. Assuming a fantasy mode of identification, they could wish to be a particular person. Assuming a realistic mode of identification, they could see existing similarities between themselves and another person. At two separate times in the interview, I encouraged children to identify with models--once using the fantasy mode, and once using the realistic mode.

In each case, I randomly arranged eight photographs in from of a child--two unrealistic characters, two mixed reality characters, two realistic characters, and two real people.

Children were then asked, in the fantasy form, to "pick the one they wish they were," and to give their reason for the selection. The selected photograph was then set aside, and the question was asked three more times. In effect, this produced a rank ordering of each child's top four choices of people they wished to be. This procedure was repeated at another point in the interview for the realistic form of identification, where children were asked to "pick the one that is almost the same as you--the way you are now and the way he is now."

The results of the fantasy identification indicate that boys of all age groups rank unrealistic characters highest as people they wish to be, followed by mixed reality characters. Both these types of models are significantly preferred over realistic characters and real people. Basically, the more unrealistic the model, the more likely boys are to wish to be them.

In contrast to these uniform results, age differences appear for the realistic mode of identification. Kindergarten and first grade boys again rank unrealistic characters highest, that is, as being similar to themselves. Moreover, this surprising belief is not the result of

misunderstanding the interviewer's question. In the fantasy form, children cite characters' strength and unique behavior as reasons for wishing to be superheroes. Here, they create similarities through their own activities (I play I'm the Bionic Man) or find superficial similarities to unrealistic characters (like, "we have the same hair"). At the same time, these younger boys find little similarity between themselves and real people or realistic characters, the types of people that in many ways are most similar to them.

Boys in the middle and older age groups are much more discerning in judging their similarity to others. They rank unrealistic characters lowest, and often select real people and realistic characters. Finally, mixed reality characters are ranked highest by children in the two older groups, and second highest by the younger group.

Taken together, these two sets of results reveal a developmental phenomenon about the nature of children's identification with different types of models. Younger children seem taken with bigger-than-life television characters. They both wish to be, and find ways that they are like them. Their identification is integrated or fused, more influenced by person type than by the form of the identification question. Both third and sixth graders are more discriminating in their personal relationships to models. They are aware that they are not similar to superheroes, even though they wish to be them. They are also aware, unlike younger children, that though they may not wish to be the ordinary people in television and real life, they are in fact, similar to them. Perhaps because older children are able to take this dual perspective about models, mixed reality characters remain highly valued in both modes of identification. Characters like the Fonz, having both realistic and unrealistic traits, may provide places where even the more sophisticated young television fan can hang both his identification hats.

In summary, the purpose of this study was to investigate, in a broad sense, children's understanding of various types of people in two important

social domains. We wondered whether apparent differences in people's reality status would be reflected in children's beliefs about and relationships to them. We found that the reality status of television and real people is evident to all children during the elementary years, but that children of various ages differ in what they make of these differences between people.

Young children exploit these differences. Though not all television characters stand out as different from real people, fantastic characters do. Both their beliefs about them, and their involvement with them are extreme. Perhaps because younger children have only limited knowledge both about people in general, and about television people in particular, characters like superheros occupy a special place in their wishes and thoughts.

By the middle elementary school years, children more critically understand these differences between people. They have a broader perspective on the attributes of both television and real world models. They have a greater ability to monitor their personal involvements, identifying more appropriately with different types of people. Though the more complex mixed reality characters still hold special appeal for these more discriminating viewers, extremely unrealistic characters like superheroes have been demystified. Evaluating people from a more"distant" perspective, older children are able to "put people in their place."

So, we see that two important elements interact in determining children's understanding of people in television and real world domains. The first element is the uniqueness of the different kinds of people that children typically encounter. All children are sensitive to the gradations of reality embodied in models--from superheroes to school teachers. The second equally important element is age-related change in children's interpretations of these people. They gradually learn wider evaluative contexts--the ways of

television and the ways of the world. In turn, they reinterpret the relevance and importance of different kinds of people to their own lives.